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SUBJECT: KOSTI WHARF - BURSTING AT THE SEAMS

Summary and Comment

¶1. On March 9, the USAID/Khartoum Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Officer conducted a one-day visit to Kosti to investigate reports of huge crowds of returnees to Southern Sudan stranded at Kosti wharf for weeks. The 1,400 returnees at the wharf exceed its capacity of 750. USAID partner Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and other humanitarian organizations are providing just enough services to keep the situation from becoming a disaster. ADRA has improved the shelter facilities at the wharf in addition to providing food rations, supplies, water and sanitation facilities, and a health clinic.

¶2. The government-run River Transport Corporation (RTC) is severely lacking the operational and funding capacity to deal with the influx and shows no sign of improving soon. There is no clear schedule of barge trips to the south. Six pushers of 16 are functioning, and operate only at a maximum of 40 percent capacity. Passenger travel on cargo barges continues unabated, although banned by national Ministry of Transport. (Note: The RTC requires travelers to sign an agreement releasing RTC from liability. End note.) According to RTC officials, critically needed equipment for repairing the pushers has been held in Port Sudan more than a month. Meanwhile, returnees continue to arrive. End summary and comment.

Kosti Wharf Returnee Situation

¶3. Kosti is located 300 kilometers (km) south of Khartoum on the White Nile. The town constitutes an important junction for both river and road transport to Southern Sudan and the western regions of Kordofan and Darfur. Kosti wharf was one of the first way stations to be established to support spontaneous returns, and USAID and other donors provide a variety of service for returnees.

¶4. The post-Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) era has put significant pressure on the RTC and yielded an increased demand for cargo services. A growing number of

returnees have sought transport on cargo barges, which unlike passenger vessels allow passengers to carry luggage. U.N. agencies are increasingly seeking cargo transport or hiring a cargo/passenger barge to move supplies to the south. In addition, the Government of National Unity (GNU) and Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) transport food on the barges, and soldiers from both Sudanese Armed Forces and the Sudan People's Liberation Army rely on barges and want to be given priority.

¶5. The wharf's capacity is visibly overstretched. More than 1,400 people are crowded into an area designed for a maximum of 750. The crowd continues to grow and there are no signs of change in the pattern of return. Water, sanitation, and health services are still holding up despite increased strain. Nevertheless, any water shortages in the city supply, which is the only source of water for the wharf, could lead to crisis and also affect the sanitation situation.

¶6. The wharf's current limited operational capacity does not appear likely to improve soon, as RTC sees no chances for increase in the number of trips, given the limited number and low capacity of pushers. Thirty-two engines for operating pushers arrived in Port Sudan in mid-February and were to be installed in collaboration with the Government of Germany. The Ministry of Finance asked RTC to make a down payment for duties and other local taxes. RTC did not advance payment, so the engines have not been released from Port Sudan. A team of German engineers and technicians tasked with fitting the engines had arrived in Kostî, but has been unable to work without the engines. According to RTC officials, Dutch government funds will support the

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assembly of 50 cargo and 5 passenger barges in Kostî. RTC is preparing the site for the project, which is expected to start as soon as the materials arrive in Kostî.

¶7. With support from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), ADRA is running a tracking and monitoring system that has identified more than 22,400 returnees since July 2004. The data is collected from 12 tracking points covering both the river and road transport network passing through Kostî, Rebek, and other locations in White Nile State. Enumerators managing the system reported that returnees frequently expect compensation of some sort in exchange for providing information.

¶8. In early 2006, the German Red Cross began operating a clinic at Kostî wharf in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MOH). The U.N. World Food Program (WFP) is scheduled to begin providing food for supplementary feeding programs for malnourished children and pregnant and lactating mothers in Kostî IDP camps. WFP will also support therapeutic feeding in the main hospitals in collaboration with MOH, as well as school feeding programs in Kostî IDP camps for approximately 18,000 children. WFP is considering whether to give a half rations in IDP camps for the period of April to July.

Recommendations

¶9. The few shelter facilities put in place by ADRA and others are already overcrowded. Some returnees preferred staying under the trees rather than the shelters to avoid the crowds. ADRA and other counterparts should prepare a contingency plan should the number of returnees continue to grow. USAID will work with them on this and continue

to monitor the situation closely.

¶10. Lobbying is needed at the Khartoum level to advance the humanitarian priorities and emphasize the urgent need for returnees to reach their destinations quickly and with dignity. The Port Sudan bottleneck of pusher engines should be high on the priority list to increase the barge capacity on the Nile.

¶11. Some counterparts on the ground mentioned that the GoSS is encouraging people to return to the south. The strained resources to support returnees and the possibility of a humanitarian emergency at the wharf should be made clear to the GoSS.

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